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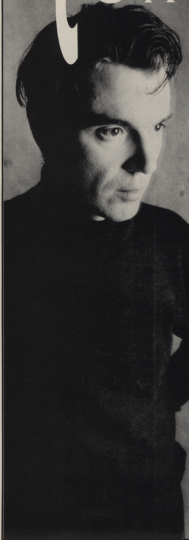
MUSIC ALTERNATIVES

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DAVID
BYRNE

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THE EX
MAHLATHINI
EVAN PARKER
LINDSAY COOPER
DEATH OF SAMANTHA
JAMES BLOOD ULMER
LINTON KWESI JOHNSON





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• ON THE COVER AND ON THIS PAGE: DAVID BYRNE.

• PHOTOS BY JAYNE WEXLER.
(Backdrop: Charles Broderson)



LATIN LOVER

• BY JOSEF WOODARD

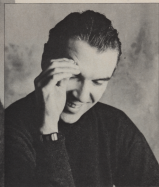
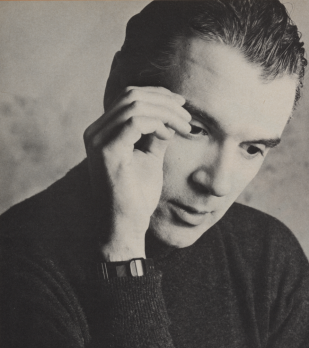
Pop music history is one of the least exact sciences, but also one of the most obsessively attended. And, for what it's worth, it is generally conceded that rock took a radical turn around the turn of the last decade,

when the primal thrusts of punk and the clever reifications of new wave took pop out of the realm of board rooms, arenas, and music schools and into art schools and garages everywhere. What it meant was a wholesale rejuvenation — in terms of new concepts, new attitudes beneath the old guitar syntax, new lyrical fiber where rot had clogged the pores. ►

JAYME WILKINSON

A high-angle, low-key photograph of David Byrne. He is wearing a dark, long-sleeved turtleneck sweater and dark trousers. He is sitting on a light-colored wooden chair, leaning forward with his hands on his knees. He is looking directly at the camera with a slightly wide-eyed, intense expression. The background is a plain, light-colored wall. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows and highlights.

DAVID
BYRNE
GOES
TROPICAL



JAYNE WEXLER

David Byrne was there in the green days of 1975, fresh out of the Rhode Island School of Design, making loopy refigured pop music with the Talking Heads, turning his own musical naivete and virtuosic irony into creative assets. More than anyone there at the outset, Byrne has taken the art school aesthetic to great heights of both imaginative leaps and public influence. Forget about the other pop bigwigs being touted as totems of '80s pop culture by politically-correct pundits wringing hands at decade's end. Despite his somewhat loony and opaque profile, Byrne has had as significant an impact as anyone in recent pop music. Through his dense workload of Heads music and more esoteric musical projects, his coopting of ethnic strains from Africa and — lately — Cuban and Brazilian traditions, his films, and his compelling friendly/friendly persona, Byrne has entered the American consciousness and lodged himself there.

As one who embraced the simple beauties and mass euphoria of catchy numbers but who also bridled against the rock star machinery, Byrne was a metaphor for what was good about the musical decade. More than that, he kept popping up in public, a shy butterfly with a restless need to plow forward and show his wares.

There he was: charming the rock

underground — a period which included the wondrous *Fear of Music*, the experimental Byrne-Brian Eno project *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, and culminated in the masterpiece *Remain in Light* (with producer Eno). There he was: graduating into the malls of America, singing about "Burning Down the House" with a goofy charisma that seemed to fuse Anthony Perkins and Mr. Rogers. There he was: the idiot savant composer penning cheeky etudes for brass band, as "Knee Plays" for Robert Wilson's grand unfinished work, *The CIVIL War*, and writing songs for choreographer Twyla Tharp's *Catherine Wheel*.

There he was: donning a big suit, entertaining the masses with innocuous funky ethnic ditties on stage and in Jonathan Demme's uncluttered concert document *Stop Making Sense*. There he was on the big screen with a tall hat and a dopey grin in a benign absurdist landscape called *Texas in True Stories*, a sly non-narrator who, as always, is both the star of the show and a sideline observer with an ironic curiosity. There he was: giving the on-again, off-again Talking Heads creative jolts with *Little Creatures and Naked*.

And now, at the end of the decade, Byrne is before the public again with what — surprisingly — is his first actual solo album,

Rei Moma. For the occasion, Byrne not only dispensed with the gray train of the Heads, but is newly outfitted with a large group of musicians from Brazilian and salsa bands around New York.

Rei Moma has, like Paul Simon's *Graceland*, been criticized by some as the work of a white musician revitalizing his own aesthetic by plugging into an extant ethnic tradition. But, in a sense, that's been Byrne's m.o. all along. Is that not the bastardly nature of the business? And, whereas Simon's coopting of Township Jive brought forth a relatively new (or at least newly available) African pop admix, Byrne's Gulf fixation is a continuation of a decades-long cross-cultural hot line that extends past Ricky Ricardo.

With its kinetic webs of rhythms and the juxtaposition of pure dance fever joy and Byrne's wry words, *Rei Moma* is as fascinating a synthesis as Byrne has yet devised. As with his previous ventures in and out of the Heads, Byrne's latest panethnic foray is joyful and loony and somehow reverent of its sources. Byrne seems acutely aware of the dichotomy presented by his current band — a white guy leading and writing for a band of Latin players. "Having sex and eating cereal, wearin' jeans and smokin' cigarettes now," he sings in "Make Believe Mamba," speaking of the virtues of artifice in pop culture. As a

mambo maestro, Byrne is making believe, perhaps, but there is love in his heart and, more importantly, there are great musicians in his band.

Questions of intent get dim in the face of the *Rei Momo* live show. Under an October moon at the old fresco Santa Barbara County Bowl, the lanky Byrne sauntered on stage with plain white garb and a desire to entertain. He skitters about like a drunken Pierrot, on the edge but always in control. The 14-piece band smoked in the way that any taut, elaborately-arranged salsa band does: infectious honeycombs of rhythm and neatly pulled punches kept our heads on their toes. Byrne paid lip service to his band on the shelf, doing "Mr. Jones" from the last Heads album, *Naked*. "We'll take questions after the show," he quipped when the inevitable requests for Heads stuff came up from the crowd.

A month later in New York, Byrne sits down in the generous Soho loft space that he calls *Toda Mundo*. Later this afternoon, he's off to the mastering lab, where he'll oversee a correction on an existing mix from the new record. "You wouldn't notice it, but, by accident, a couple of drum beats were accidentally chopped off of 'Independence Day.' We're putting them back on for subsequent pressings."

In his office/home studio sit a pile of salsa and Latin records, and a book called *Masters of Contemporary Brazilian Song*. Outside, regular siren wails counteract the deceptive calm inside Chez Byrne. He's at home between four stops on the west coast and Paris. It's the day before he does *Saturday Night Live*. Byrne is in a fairly relaxed, expansive mood, although he'll drift away in mid-sentence occasionally—whether in search of the right phrase or losing track of the subject at hand is not clear. A hearty laugh slips out at unexpected times.

After the interview, Byrne opens his mail and finds there a video collection of deadpan short films by his frequent collaborator David Wild—bytes of wacky American anthropology with some spiritual connection to Byrne's own *True Stories*. Byrne snickers periodically as we watch this gallery of oddities from our nation's backroads—items that Charles Kuralt missed. When a short on a sign painter who specializes in life-size cow portraits appears [signs for dairies and the like], Byrne bursts out laughing, making me think that perhaps the scene will wind up in a song.

The previous Saturday night, Byrne's *Rei Momo* ensemble had settled into Brooklyn Academy of Music's Opera House for a swinging evening presented as part of the New Music America Festival. "The audiences at those events tend to be stiffer and sit on their hands more than at other kinds of shows, as if they're expecting a dose of culture," Byrne grins slightly. "They're really respectful." Byrne is a transop artist who wants many angles of entry into ideas and into audiences: he wants respect and flexibility of context, and he doesn't seem to mind the glare of being the life of the party.

Why don't we start with *Rei Momo*. Is this the fruition of a long obsession that you've had?

Yeah, I started going to Latin dance concerts, or whatever you want to call them, about nine years ago. Angel Fernandez, the guy who is kind of the musical director of this band, remembered that Ray Barreto had pointed me out to him about nine years ago at the Corso, which is a ballroom way uptown. At that time, Angel didn't know who I was, but Ray Barreto apparently did. I'd go out dancing and occasionally buy a record. Gradually my interest got deeper and included more Brazilian music. The most accessible stuff here was the Latin stuff.

A couple of years ago, I was asked to do something for this movie *Something Wild*. I don't do a song for a movie very often, so I said "yeah, I'll do it if I can do a duet with Celia Cruz." They said yeah, that's fine. So that pushed me one step further. From that experience, I sat in on one of her sets at a club

apartment. It's like polyrhythms cubed. Given that density of sonic and ethnic input in the city, is this album, in a way, a portrait of New York for you?

Kind of. It's not that way in this neighborhood. But when I first moved here, I lived about four blocks east on Christie Street and then after that on Avenue A and 7th Street. It was the same thing; if we'd have the windows open at night, we were hearing salsa music. Later on in the '70s, it was merengue. It was always there. If you wanted to partake of it, you could. If you didn't want to, you could pass it by. And, at some point, I decided I would have a taste.

Some of the things I heard were kind of by accident. I went to Mexico City about four or five years ago. There was a radio station there that played only cumbias. Really good stuff. It was a hilarious radio station. They'd have carts that played car crashes and screaming voices. It was like radio used to be here, but it's gotten kind of staid. They'd play

"I'm ignorant of the music that's most popular in this country at the moment."

and met Angel at a club. I worked with him on the horn arrangements on "Mr. Jones" from the last Talking Heads record. So it has been accumulating. In my listening habits over the last few years, I'm more and more comfortable with the music and listen to it for pleasure. So it's not a new passion; but the culmination of a long-term listening habit. My involvement in Brazilian music is more recent. Five years ago, I picked up some records by accident. That led me to get more and more. If anybody knew anything about the music, I'd ask them about it.

I guess it starts out casual, but then it gets more serious as I get deeper into it. It starts off with just a record that you like or something. You ask yourself, "Where can I find more like this?"

Is the nature of these obsessions to feed off of themselves? It's sometimes easy to burrow into alcoves of culture and shut out other distractions.

Yeah. I'm not aware of probably most of the top ten. I don't have trade publications. For instance, I haven't heard the Rolling Stones record. I haven't heard the last U2 record or the last REM record... I could go on and on. I'm ignorant of the music that's most popular in this country at the moment. I know the names and the styles of music, but I don't know what they're doing currently.

I stay at a friend's house in New York in an area where there is always a cacophony, a battle of salsa songs surrounding the

a song and then at the end, [loudly] R-R-R-R, big car crashes. Sometimes they'd do it for fun, and sometimes they'd come on afterwards and advise you to buy auto insurance [laughs]. But it made for a more exciting audio environment.

On the album, it seems as though you've taken care to differentiate song to song, in terms of varied styles.

My listening habits led me to see that there were really distinct styles associated with different countries. They lent themselves to different kinds of songs or different kinds of writing. I consciously thought that I'd represent the range of my listening habits, and that it would also be a way to have a variety of different kinds of songs and prevent the record from having one texture throughout—as some times tends to do on records. I jumped from style to style, but since all of these styles are played in New York, it didn't seem like a very hard task. If musicians didn't play in each style, they're at least familiar with them. If they're not good at a certain style, they'd know somebody who was.

You probably did launch a search for the right kind of musicians, those who were adept and flexible.

The drummer Milton Cardona was real helpful in that kind of way. He'd listened to my demos. On some things, I knew what I wanted and on other ones, I wasn't sure exactly what I wanted. He'd advise me on what kind of rhythm would be best suited for ▶

a song. Someone said that it was like we were casting the songs. Between Milton and me and the recording engineer John Fausty — who had done Ruben Blades records and Willie Colón records — we'd discuss who'd be the best group to interpret a given song. For a lot of the material, it was the same rhythm section, although sometimes we'd vary it if it was something they weren't used to playing.

Did you write songs with certain idioms in mind, or did that come after the compositional fact?

Oh yeah. Not all of them. About half and half. With about half of them, I knew that, let's say I wanted to be a cumbia. With the other half, I'd just write something in a vaguely Latin groove, but I wouldn't know the name of the rhythm. Milton would say "well, that sounds like such and such." That's how we could interpret it.

On the song "Independence Day," there is

"With a lot of popular music in the last decade, the rhythm has been very square."

an odd passage where the giddy fiddles come in and suddenly the reference point switches to the Appalachian mountains. How did that figure into the arrangement?

To me, I was listening to the track and it had a touch of zydeco in the feel of it. I thought they, we could put a fiddle in here and it will fit in nicely. But you'd never hear it in that kind of rhythmic feel normally.

All these downhome glissandi put you in mind of bluegrass music. Do you play accordion?

No. I wish I did.

I notice you're involved in some accordion association.

Yeah. When I was doing *True Stories*, I worked a lot with Carl Finch, from this group *Breve Combo*. For the movie, we put together a whole bunch of accordion players — must have been about 30 of them — and made an accordion marching band. Carl wrote a piece of music for it. Once they met, that spurred them on to form the *Texas Accordion Association*. They've been together ever since. I'm kind of like a charter member.

In that you came from more of a traditional guitar-bass-drums background, do you find yourself seeking out more exotic sounds, such as the accordion and the textures on *Rei Momo*?

Well, I guess it seems that way, although it's just part of the music I'm listening to.

Sometimes, one has to seek a little bit to find an accordion player who can do certain things, but I don't feel like it's a conscious effort to do it. It just reflects what I listen to most of the time. If you don't listen exclusively to guitar-bass-drums music all the time, you don't fall into thinking in those terms all the time.

I take it that you didn't grow up tinkering on the guitar and indulging dreams of rock and roll glory.

No. Well, I was in a band in junior high school and in high school and on and off through college. I took it sort of seriously, but it wasn't like I wanted to make a career out of it. It was just something I did in my spare time and was fun. I never realistically thought that I could make a living doing it. Maybe that's why it worked, because it wasn't planned out.

A lot of great music and art in general goes to great effort to give the appearance of not showing great effort. It may be an

musician — even the percussion players. They wouldn't have every stop written out, but they'd have a structure that they could follow. That was time-consuming and not cheap. But then you can just go right into it the way a lot of Latin bands work. In Latin bands, the membership rotates: it's sometimes flexible. If one trumpet player couldn't make a date, someone else who's a little bit familiar with the music could sit in, read the chart and sound good. You could never do that in a rock band.

Were they all excited about the project?

I think everybody feels good about it. It's been well-received by audiences. It's a real thrill, because a lot of the audiences are not familiar with this kind of music. Although it's not exactly a typical Latin or Brazilian show, or whatever you want to call it, but it's still pretty far from a rock show. The audiences seem to accept it pretty well. They don't seem to stop and ask themselves whether they should like it or whether it should be this or that or "what is it?"

Maybe that response is because, while it's slightly foreign, it's such a sensual, albeit complex, music. It hits you on many fronts. This could theoretically open some ears to new musical worlds.

That's certainly true for a lot of the audience, I think. It's pretty exciting to see these people who may have never seen a Latin show or heard Latin music dancing around to it. And they'll probably check out some other kinds of stuff as a result. It's not the purpose of what I'm doing to be instructive. If they want that, they should go somewhere else. But it has that effect as a byproduct.

One of the basic differences with salsa music, in particular, and more conventional American dance traditions, is that they avoid the downbeat like the plague. That's in direct opposition to R&B and rock counterparts. Does that take some adjustment on your part?

It's almost like you don't notice it when you're dancing to the music. It does make you dance in a slightly different way. You don't notice it unless someone points it out and says "look, there's nothing playing on the downbeat." Or if you try to play some of the parts yourself, then you find out that the way it's put together is very different from the way rock or whatever a put together. But, without being analytical about it, I don't think you notice. The body just moves to it without any difficulty. You can tap your foot and sometimes you find your foot tapping on a downbeat that's not being played.

Do you feel that there's a more natural and deep relationship between the people and their music in Latin cultures than here?

I don't know. I notice things, but I couldn't generalize. When we're on tour, one of the trombone players' rooms always ends up being the party room. What happens is that ▶

THE CARIBBEAN CONNECTION:

DAVID BYRNE'S SAMBA SIDEKICKS

• BY
DAVID
SHIRLEY

David Byrne has had a successful career portraying musical characters who are awkward, frightened, and basically in over their heads. But with his newest project, the Latin and Brazilian-inspired *Rel Mamo*, one can't help but get the feeling — listening as the complex rhythms jerk around and swallow up the singer's frail, staccato delivery — that maybe this time it's more than just an act; maybe for once the sometimes Talking Head really is in over his head. But whether it's staged or real, the spontaneity and apparent lack of control are suited to Byrne. Among the songs on the new recording are some of the composer's best work since 1980's *Remain in Light*.

For Brazilian percussionist Cyro Baptista, working in the studio with a composer not fully in control of his project was a welcome relief from much of his usual session work in New York. "Sometimes I get sick just going into the studio," sighs Baptista. "Most of the time on other peoples' projects, you have to play the same thing over and over and over again to get exactly the right sound that they're looking for, to get this Brazilian *deja vu*."

"But David left a lot of space for us," continues Baptista, who selected and contracted the other Brazilian musicians who appear on the recording. "After he had communicated to us his idea of what he wanted from the songs, he really let us loose and allowed us to play in our own way, to make our own contribution to the final product."

Baptista, for years one of the most prolific accompanists in New York, is currently in the pre-production stage of his first solo recording, which will include arrangements by John Zorn and Peter Scherer. In addition to his ▶

Cyro Baptista

ongoing work with Zorn (with whom he'll play at Barcelona's Maricane festival in May) and with Scherer and partner Arto Lindsay. Baptista is also regularly featured in the bands of Herbie Mann, Nana Vasconcelos (including his current recording *Rain Dance on Islands*), and Ryuichi Sakamoto, with whom he recently completed a one-month world tour.

In spite of his frequent gigs in and around downtown New York, Baptista had heard very little of the music of Byrne and Talking Heads when he was first approached about coordinating the Brazilian end of the project. "Arto Lindsay called me up," he remembers, "and asked me if I would be interested. Before this, I never knew much about David or the music that he played. But David is such a sweetheart, and I knew right away after talking with him that I liked the way he wanted to approach the songs and to combine different kinds of music." Another thing Baptista liked was the speed with which Byrne worked. "It was amazing," he laughs. "After I got the percussion section together, we were in and out of the studio in one day. It all happened very, very fast."

Among the other Brazilian musicians that Baptista recruited for the project were two members of the pagode band *ShowBia Brasil Samba*, Reinaldo Fernandes and Jorge DaSilva. Both percussionists (Fernandes plays *tamborim* and *repique* on the recording; DaSilva, *repique* and *pandeiro*), the two have played together recently with John Zorn and Arto Lindsay, in addition to their work in the samba schools in Brazil with such major figures as Elia Soares, Martinho da Vila, and Beth Carvalho.

The obvious question to Byrne, whose fascination with Brazilian music had already resulted in the 1989 release of two personally selected compilations (*Beleza Tropical* and *O Samba*, both on Sire), isn't "why samba?" but "why not more of it?" After all, there are only two samba-inspired numbers on *Rei Momo*, "Don't Want To Be a Part of Your World" and the collaboration with Arto Lindsay, "Office Cowboy," with only the first of these appearing on the album. Part of the problem may be the inevitable difficulty in fitting the samba — whose light chants and melodies are usually derived spontaneously from the song's densely textured rhythms — to lyrics and a melody that have been composed in advance.

"What we did with David Byrne is different from what we do with the samba," explains Fernandes. "In samba, everything begins with the percussion and then you build from that. But David already knew what he wanted the song to be. The first thing he did was to show us his melody, and our job was to put the samba with this melody that was already there."

"Before I ever came into the studio," elaborates Baptista about the development of the songs on the recording, "David already had a strong conception of what he wanted to do in the songs, and I was asked to respond to that in developing the percussion."

But, insists Da Silva, the development of the samba numbers on *Rei Momo* wasn't really that different from what often happens when one is composing for the samba. "When you write samba, sometimes the percussion doesn't come first. Sometimes you start with a piece of a melody or some other idea, and then you build the percussion in response to that."

"At first we were responding to his idea," continues Baptista, "but after that, the percussion became the main thing; everything else — the guitars, the *cavaquinho* [a Brazilian ukulele], even the horns — everything else we built from that."

In the end, the musicians were pleased with the results. "I, myself, am very happy with the way it turned out," insists Fernandes. "The way we were able to put David Byrne's musical ideas and the samba together. What we ended up with is something new, something that is not exactly the samba, but something much like the samba — and something that I like very much."

Baptista agrees. "I think the key is that David left plenty of room for us to approach the songs in our own way. He really tried to encourage us to be spontaneous, to play things the way they felt to us. And because of this, I think that the sense of the thing, of the samba, was there, that we were able to capture the real Brazilian sound. After hearing the recording, I really feel that we were able to bring some truth to what we played."

But finally, insists Fernandes, the only way to judge the music's success is in the effect that the beat of the samba has on the people who listen to it. "In the end, your instrument and your music you put toward the people; you play it for them, not for some idea. So it's the people, the people who care about the music, who have to check out what we did on the record and decide for themselves." *

often we'll put on some music and half of the people in the room will start dancing, which is not something that ever happened on, say, a rock and roll tour. It's kind of nice. It's not what you expect to see in a hotel room; there's not a whole lot of room to move around, but it's very nice to have a little dance after the dance.

In Indonesia, music is very integral in society and they don't separate so much between social roles — that a given person is a musician whereas the next is just a farmer.

I think that's true somewhat in Brazil. There's less of a feeling that music is a commodity that you buy, or that the professionals make music and we consume. It's a similar situation, where there's a party of somebody's house and often someone will bring some drums or bottles and people start banging on stuff and dancing, making their own music rather than playing records.

Does that relate at all to the down of the punk-cum-new-wave years, which invited people with a cursory technical ability on their instruments? Does it relate to your own story?

I guess somewhat. I certainly feel an affinity with that, that if you're motivated to express yourself, you can find a simple way to do it. You don't have to be a virtuoso to do it. Sometimes that even gets in the way of your expression.

Did you feel any qualms inserting, in a sense, yourself into another sort of cultural context — or is that, in fact, the name of the game?

No, I didn't. Musicians would tell me if something was not kosher. Sometimes the stuff that was not kosher was fun and worthwhile anyway. No, I'm sorry. I'm not guilty at all (laughs).

I don't mean to be the judge and the jury. It seems that a lot of cultural contexts are not pure anyway. Whites have gotten a lot of mileage out of R&B, and that's not exactly a direct link to their ancestry.

I can give hundreds of examples of people in places where they're sort of not expected to be — Miles Davis playing with electric instruments, Wynton Marsalis playing Bach, Gilberto Gil plays a lot of reggae, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones basically took American black music, reworked it a little bit and sent it back. Eric Clapton basically plays the blues. There's no end to it. In the present day, none of what is perceived of as other cultures are limited. The Latin community in New York grew up not just hearing Latin music. They also were aware of the Beatles and James Brown, whatever. They may have chosen to play Latin music, but they grew up in an audio environment that featured all this other stuff, as well. It's the same with musicians in Brazil; they grew up listening to Brazilian music, British music, American music. It always ends up mixed up together. They're not pure.

Maybe there's never really been a pure pop music.

I don't think so.

Maybe Cole Porter.

(Boisterous laughter) Yeah.

Where do songs come from? Do they besiege you, in a way, like inspirational flashes, or do they require a lot of assembly?

It kind of seems like the germ of the song — the seed that the rest of it grows from — is often some inspiration and you don't know where it comes from. Maybe a phrase falls together on a page and you just say "yep, that's it." Or maybe something just comes out of your mouth and you don't know where it came from. All of a sudden, the rest of the song is mopped out for you and then it becomes a craft to follow that path and get the rest of it to work. I assume that it comes

from the unconscious, that it's like a dream that you're able to tap into during waking hours. That's where those little seeds come from.

Do you think songs have a hotline to the unconscious, more than other media, literary or cinematically?

I think film can be pretty good. With literature, it takes longer. I mean, you have to read more words, but it also can do it. I guess anything can do it, but it's pretty easy with a song. You have the music that automatically lifts them out of the realm of reality and the rational, so you don't question.

Is irony as big a part of your diet as people tend to assume?

I don't think it is anymore. I think it might have been for awhile, but not as much anymore.

Does that have to do with a change in your own mindframe, or is it just a different way of approaching songwriting?

(Pause) It's probably a slight change in my own way of thinking, as well. I don't know exactly how yet. I'm too close to myself.

Your brass works for the *Knee Plays* project were tasty additions.

Thank you. It's a shame we couldn't have done it with the same band that went on tour — when they did some performances with the staging and the band over on one side of the stage. It was a group from Boston — Les

Marables, nothing to do with the musical.

They're a brass band that would adapt songs or things from all different places — New Orleans, Bulgaria, Brazilian stuff, Spanish stuff. We engaged them to perform it on the road and I think they would have put more comp into it than the group that was recorded on the record.

Were you inspired by that group?

No, by the Dirty Dozen. In fact, I tried working on some of the stuff with the Dirty Dozen, but some of it was pretty far from what they were about and it didn't fit, so we said "let's not do this."

Speaking about songwriting and the mysterious sparks thereof, does this influx of other, unfamiliar music egg you on — the challenge of a new wrapping?

Yeah, sometimes. Sometimes that gives you more of a kick, a little more of a push to do something. Otherwise, the natural tendency

chinks put together, a lot of scenes that connect one into another.

Do you think that *True Stories* was misunderstood in a lot of ways?

I felt, in this country, it was. In this country, it was sometimes viewed as the work of a New Yorker making fun of Texas. I took it back to Texas and they didn't feel that way. They thought it was funny. They can laugh at the stuff that's going on around them. In Europe, they sensed that there was more affection in the movie than satire, which was how I intended it. Of course, however it comes across to people who see it — that's the way it is for them. But the way I intended it was for it to be more affectionate than satirical. A lot of times, it was perceived of as being a New York smartass coming in, poking fun at the poor helpless Texans [laughs].

That was a nice hat you donned. It could be viewed as relating to Errol Morris films, albeit in a fiction film. It deals in a kind of quirky anthropology, in a way. The characters in [Morris' documentaries] *Gates of Heaven* or *Vernon, Florida* are buffoons. To say that they're noble figures sounds patronizing, but we love those folks — the philosophizing turkey hunter in *Vernon* is an anti-hero.

I heard that that film was a kind of an accident, that he'd originally gone there because, in *Vernon*, people were chopping off their fingers to collect an insurance. There was a rash of this going on in the community. He wanted to get people to talk about it, and nobody would talk about it, because it was a scam. I guess, in the course of going there, he got to meet all these other people.

That's funny. *Thin Blue Line* came about accidentally, too.

It was another case of looking for one thing and coming up with something else.

Do you find that those kinds of blissful accidents occur in your own creative life? Is that where the good stuff really comes from?

I guess so. I'm not as aware of it as that, though. Some things might be accidents, but not really.

Do you share in Morris' interest in the America outside of the coasts, the America outside of mass media's eye?

I'm not as fascinated now as I was a few years ago. But America's unique, I think. People often don't have a cultural ground to fall back on, so everything is often invented from scratch. You end up with a kind of unique hodgepodge. People invent their own belief systems to help guide them through life that end up being totally original. It's kind of a by-product of... oh, I won't go on that line. It seems to be a kind of creativity that, I think, is unknown in Europe and other parts of the world. They scratch their heads at it, but they envy it a little bit, too.

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Are they jealous of our frontier attitude?

A little bit, not to romanticize it. They grew up where there's a way to do things. They look at a city like Houston, Texas and say "well, that breaks every rule in the book." But it still survives.

You said you were going to restore two drum beats for future pressings of *Rei Momo*. Would you say that you try to locate the fine line between perfectionism and intuition?

Yeah, I think you use the intuition to guide you and the rest of it is kind of a craft. And if you push the craft part of it too much, you lose all the spontaneity, if you try to make everything perfect. On this record, we did record most of it live. We'd have a fair size group to record the rhythms — piano, guitar, bass, drums and all that kind of stuff — and then there would usually be at least one other recording session which would be all the horns, all of once. Then, aside from my singing, that would be it. There wouldn't be that process of layering instruments afterwards. What you'd hear was what you'd get. It was nice that way. There were imperfections that became a part of the sound. Maybe it's ironic that such complex music, polyrhythmically designed, is so simply captured whereas big budget Hollywood pop music — more simplistic from a musical standpoint — has a tradition of elaborating and excessive studio work. You hear about [in a mock-gruff newswoman voice] "this record was two years in the making..."

And millions later. How does that working process you described differ from a Talking Heads record?

It changes from record to record. Some of them were kind of layered, or improvised but with a painstaking process. With the last record, *Naked*, a lot of it was recorded live in the studio and then we'd overdub a little bit here and there, but not that much since it was so augmented by a whole bunch of other musicians laying the song down to begin with. There wasn't that room to add much more.

The textured quality of *Remain in Light* suggests a lot of painterly touches in the working process.

That was done in bits and pieces, one instrument at a time. You get a different kind of result.

That was the result of you and Brian Eno conceptualizing in the studio?

Yeah, well we had done the *Bush of Ghosts* record before that, although it came out afterwards. It got held up on account of us processing all the legal permissions for all the voices used. That took almost a year. We continued a similar method that we'd begun on the other record, of layering stuff and, each time we'd add something, we'd react to

something that had been added previously. The songs wouldn't have any key changes or chord changes, but changes in instruments and textures would create the different sections. So it was very much a studio record, which was fun.

Would you like to do that again with a Talking Heads record, or is that a thing of the past now?

Hard to tell. Hard to tell.

It was logical, in a way, that you were roped into the New Music America Festival. Do you feel a kindred spirit with that world?

To a certain extent, yes. I probably know more of those musicians personally than I know musicians in the rock world. I guess I feel a part of that tradition, but a lot of the time I do pop songs, so it's naturally more accessible and more commercial or whatever.

Is there an essential attitude of a New Music player or composer?

They've widened their scope. It began a year ago in Miami, when they included salsa and Latin composers along with the more expected musicians. I think the bookings in New York continued that tradition, of not limiting the category of New Music to the line that follows Stockhausen, John Cage, Stravinsky and that kind of thing, but to including improvising traditions, no matter where they came from. They might get in trouble if they broaden their boundaries too much, though [laughs].

It could become absurdly all-inclusive. A certain brand of patron saint of American music is Charles Ives, on a line that could include you, in a way...

Because he's self-taught?

In that he incorporated Americana and yet turned it upside down. Are you a fan of his music?

Same of it. Some of it I just find too chaotic for me. There's one piece for four different orchestras playing at the same time, different

snatches and bits and pieces of songs. It's a neat aural experience, but as a record you want to sit down and listen to, it's not something you want to do every day.

Are there any records you would like to sit down and listen to every day?

Oh, there's plenty. There are stacks of (turns to look at a pile of records behind him)... This is all salsa stuff, and there's another pile in the other room, a wider range of stuff.

Were there certain albums as you were growing up that implanted themselves in your gray matter?

I guess so. I was into Beatles records, Rolling Stones records, the "Cold Sweat" period of James Brown. Some hard groups like Cream. I used to listen to those records a lot. You can't sell Velvet Underground. Some of the earlier funk stuff, like the Ohio Players and the early Kool and the Gang. I also listened to a lot of the Nonesuch/Explorer series; I could get them out of my local public library. They also had stuff that would be called New Music at the time, like Stockhausen, Cage, Xenakis, Edgar Varese and all that kind of stuff. They were all available to check out. This was in the late '60s, so that kind of wider-ranging interests were encouraged. It wasn't thought to be pretentious or arty. It was cool [laughs].

What happened to those days? In some modest way, it's approaching that state of openness again now.

Yeah, I'm guardedly optimistic.

Do you find yourself in the uncomfortable position of trying to keep the customer satisfied and yourself satisfied at this point?

It's usually just myself. If I feel good about it, then I have to assume that other people might like it as well. Most of the time, I think I'm right. Not always. Sometimes I think I'm right, but I haven't been able to put it over well, so it fails on another level. I think that if one tries to second guess what people are going to like to hear, then you wind up chasing your own tail. When you get there, they're going to actually be interested in hearing something else. •

